

The use of evaluations at IDRC

Current evaluation thinking puts a great deal of emphasis on use-driven evaluation and qualitative research. In January 2002, internationally renowned evaluator Michael Quinn Patton came to IDRC to discuss his approach for ensuring that evaluations are useful for decision-makers. What distinguishes a utilization-focussed approach is “the pragmatic use of evaluation findings and the evaluation process ... [how an evaluation] is designed and implemented in a way that really makes a difference to improving programs and improving decisions about programs.”

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Program Initiatives (PIs) comprise the largest programming modality in the Centre. One of the key challenges in IDRC’s programming is to combine responsiveness with quality and focus. Evaluations are part of the learning process, and are routinely carried out as key components of PI project and program based activity.

This year, an informal survey was conducted within Program and Partnership Branch to get a general sense of how PI-supported evaluations are actually used within the PI or more broadly at the corporate level. Team Leaders were asked to provide their responses to the following questions, based on a recent evaluation undertaken by their PI (detailed in table below). The responses are synthesized under each question by PI / program.

PI / Unit	Evaluation Report	Date
Acacia	Evaluation and Learning System for Acacia (ELSA): Emerging Lessons	Feb. 2001
CBNRM	Expanding the Horizon: An Evaluation of the Mekong Delta Farming Systems Research and Development Institute’s Capacity Development Efforts	Nov. 2001
Gender	IDRC Learning Study: Special Expert Advisory Fund for Mainstreaming Gender in IDRC	Feb. 2001
MIMAP	MIMAP Program Initiative, Review of Experience: Directions for the Future	Oct. 2000
MINGA	Preliminary Evaluation: Projects Research Community-based Coastal Resources Management Program in the Caribbean	May 2001
PANAsia	PanAsia RnD Grants Program Evaluation	Jan. 2002

¹ IDRC Reports: *In Conversation*: Michael Quinn Patton by Lisa Waldick, February 8, 2002

PI / Unit	Evaluation Report	Date
PLaW	A Report of the mid-term Review of the Eastern and Central Africa Programme for Agricultural Policy Analysis (ECAPAPA) to the Executive Secretary of the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA)	May 2001
SUB	Harvesting Together: IDRC's Support for Agrobiodiversity	Nov. 2001

What was the general purpose of this evaluation?

According to the responses received, PIs have recently been using evaluations for two general objectives: to judge the merit or worth of a project or program, or to improve a project or program. Often, these two objectives were linked, particularly if there was knowledge generated or lessons to be incorporated into further phases of the project or program. There was an overriding emphasis on learning from past experiences to inform and improve future programming.

The specific responses are as follows:

Acacia	to provide Centre management with a preview of the areas of learning emerging from the work supported by ELSA.
CBNRM	to improve, through action research, the understanding of individual and organizational capacity development efforts and the tools for monitoring and evaluating these efforts and their results.
Gender	initially to fulfill the corporate reporting function as required by PCRs; ultimately to generate lessons from past experience to inform future gender programming.
MIMAP	to assess capacity building and research impact by evaluating previous experience, current activities and future plans of the PI in terms of building capacity for analysis and broad-based dialogue; and to recommend how to strengthen these capacity-building roles.
MINGA	to develop ways to identify lessons and share learning within the Small Grants project; to learn from experiences to date.
PANAsia	to provide an historical review of the competitive Grants Program; examine the current processes that are being used within the PAN Asia Grants Program; summarize the comments and feedback from grant applicants and committee members; provide recommendations to improve the Grants Program; identify

successful completed projects with positive change for showcasing the significance of the Grants Program and for dissemination purposes.

PLaW	to review progress and effectiveness of projects and methods followed according to objectives, relevance to needs and priorities at the time of the evaluation; to help with decisions on required adjustments if needed; to prepare for follow up work.
SUB	to improve the SUB program through identifying strengths and weaknesses, and point to work that needs consolidation and future areas of programming.

Who were the identified users of this evaluation?

For project level evaluations (PLaW, MINGA, CBNRM, PANAsia), users identified were the actual project team, or staff of the institution administering the project. In these instances, PI/IDRC staff were identified as secondary users. These evaluations were mostly aimed at identifying strengths and weaknesses of the project, improving the quality or content of project outputs, and to identify areas for more effective management of the project itself. The intention was that project staff would benefit from this feedback.

For program level evaluations (GENDER, SUB, MIMAP, ACACIA), the primary users were identified as PI/IDRC staff or IDRC management. These evaluations dealt with the assessment of more strategic program-related aspects of the PI, and recommendations on re-designing these elements to increase future relevance and impact. Internal management structures in IDRC (eg, PI members, the Program and Operational Committee, SMC or the Board) were the ultimate users of the results of these evaluations where management-level decisions were required on the future form and function of the PI or program.

Other partners and donors were identified as users by PANAsia and PLaW.

The specific responses are as follows:

Acacia	Acacia PI team / IDRC management
CBNRM	Project team at the project institution and related networks; CBNRM PI team, IDRC staff
Gender	Gender Unit Staff, members of the Program and Operational Committee (internal IDRC management)
MIMAP	MIMAP PI team, IDRC and MIMAP partners

MINGA	Internal management of the project itself (not the beneficiaries), regional and Canadian partners; steering committee. The evaluation focussed mostly on the researchers and the management of the research process.
PANAsia	IDRC staff in the PANAsia program, ICT4D management, members of the Grants Committee, the institution administering the program as well as other potential donors and contributors to the program.
PlaW	Project and network members and staff (in both cases also the ASARECA constituency of NARSs, CGIARS, NGOs); other partners, including donors such as IDRC, USAID, Rockefeller, European Union.
SUB	SUB PI team

Did users participate in the evaluation process? How?

The participation of users in the evaluation process was prevalent in all cases.

Acacia	The Acacia program and project teams were involved in the entire process by participating in setting the evaluation objectives and by providing information. Comments were also provided on the draft report.
CBNRM	Users participated through a two day self assessment workshop carried out by the project institution staff, questionnaires, interviews, and key informant interviews including with staff from IDRC.
Gender	Gender Unit staff reviewed the draft report and provided feedback to the consultant.
MIMAP	All MIMAP team members and many MIMAP partners were interviewed.
MINGA	Feedback was provided from IDRC staff and project staff themselves.
PANAsia	Users were interviewed (physical visit) or received a detailed questionnaire (by e-mail). Input was also provided through interviews with beneficiaries of the grant program as well as some whose applications were rejected.
PLaW	User feedback was solicited through surveys and discussions with different stakeholders.
SUB	The initial study design and subsequent drafts were circulated to the team for comments and input.

What was the planned use of this evaluation?

The planned use of the evaluations was linked to the general objective, detailed in section 1 above. The specific responses follow:

Acacia	to improve Acacia programming by providing potential areas of learning, research issues, and themes.
CBNRM	to determine whether the project advanced the identification of key CBNRM issues to be researched and the methodologies to do so; to assess whether the program improved the capacity of the researchers to do better research, including the capacity for participatory monitoring and evaluation; to better understand the dynamics of successful capacity building for CBNRM-oriented project development.
Gender	to fulfill the PCR reporting requirement. In the end, it was very useful in providing lessons learned and recommendations for the future of gender programming at IDRC.
MIMAP	for PI prospectus and strategy development, improving PI effectiveness and management.
MINGA	to help in design of the phase two project proposal.
PANAsia	to improve the efficiency of this ICT Grants Program in its next phase.
PLaW	to provide a reading to the project institution as representing most stakeholders in order to decide on future efforts.
SUB	to improve the SUB program through identifying strengths and weaknesses, and point to work that needs consolidation and future areas of programming.

Were the evaluation findings used? By whom? And how?

In all cases, the evaluation findings were used.

Specific responses:

Gender	The evaluation findings were used by the new Senior Gender Specialist in formulating the document “Gender Unit Programming in Research and
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Mainstreaming, 2001-2004" September 2001. This was presented to the Program and Operational Meetings in October 2001 which detailed a plan of work for the Gender Unit. The mainstreaming approach was designed to provide concrete opportunities for Gender Unit-PI collaboration. There was unanimous approval for the program of work presented in this document.

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| SUB | The evaluation findings were used by the SUB PI team. The report was presented at the SUB meeting (November 2001), and used as a basis for developing the SUB workplan over the remainder of the prospectus period. |
| MIMAP | The evaluation findings were used by the the MIMAP PI team and central partners (Laval, Philippines). Many of the recommendations were integrated into the re-orientation and re-design of the MIMAP implementation strategy, as direct input into the second phase MIMAP prospectus. |
| PanAsia | The evaluation findings were used by the PAN R&D Grant committee at a meeting in Singapore in January 2002 where staff of IDRC staff and the institution administering the program, and committee members were present. Some of the recommendations have already been implemented. The recommendations will also be taken into consideration in the business plan which will then be prepared. The successful projects identified during the evaluation are now being visited to prepare success stories which will be published. |
| ACACIA | The evaluation findings were used by the ACACIA PI team in preparing the ACACIA second phase prospectus. Most of the findings have been used by Acacia POs into project programming, planning and delivery. Centre management also used the results to change the ELSA management by re-integrating ELSA functions more into program/project development and delivery and emphasizing "learning and development" in program delivery. |
| PLaW | The evaluation findings were intensively discussed and used by the research team to make adjustments in the objectives and approaches of the project. The report was also used by other donors to adjust their position of support. In addition, the project institution is now negotiating and preparing another phase based on the adjustments recommended by the evaluation. |
| MINGA | The evaluation findings were used by the internal management of the project. The report produced lessons learned about the process of dealing with small grants, and focussed on how to do this better. Direct results were a project publication and a phase two document. The evaluation was one of the key factors that resulted in the decision to go into a second phase of the project. MINGA is now looking at ways at how the model can be generalized and applied to other situations. |

CBNRM The evaluation findings were used by the project staff in self assessment of the institution to understand its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, challenges; by department heads and staff to validate the theory of action; by IDRC staff in the sharing of findings; by the institution staff to practice the approach and methods to identify lessons for improving capacity development efforts in the future. Potential further uses: strategic future planning for the project institution, formulation of an organizational action plan, and an evaluation of individual capacity development.

7. *Is there anything else you would like to mention related to helping evaluations be more useful at IDRC?*

- Rather than following “cookie-cutter” approaches to learning from project successes or failures (ie. PCRs), evaluations that suit the needs, rather than comply with a format, of a PI or unit are ultimately more useful.
- Assessments should be done routinely as part of substantial projects (built into project agreements)
- There is a need for more “compiling up” for PI reviews, as well as PI or component level evaluations
- There is a need for more participation by the Evaluation Unit in PI evaluation design, and cross-PI / region studies where appropriate (eg, the current policy impact study). A review across several projects provides a better basis for comparison.
- The external review type of evaluation is less useful. This is less geared towards learning for the PI.
- The current policy impact study is very useful. By taking a cross-PI perspective, it provides a platform for the discussion of different approaches. It helps the PIs at the programming level in the development of strategies. The case study approach is very useful because of the involvement of many people - researchers and intended beneficiaries. This provides a broader perspective from point of view of other actors and beneficiaries. Typical project evaluations have a more limited sphere and scope, depending on the substantive nature of PIs.
- The timing of evaluations is crucial. They should be tied into major milestones of the PI, and contribute to strategic thinking, impact assessment, and closing the loop.
- Evaluations would be more useful if they dealt with how PIs can fine-tune / re-orient their work to respond to emerging needs - perhaps focus on the evaluation of a strategic issue.

The approach and scope would be different, with more emphasis on forward planning and increased relevance by situating the PI's work in a broader context.

- Evaluations are more useful if there is a well-defined objective. If a project is evaluated, the results are of no use if there is no intention of supporting another phase which will take into account the findings.
- Projects should be more focussed on research objectives; evaluations should be demand driven; targeted evaluation findings users should be identified; and evaluation finding users should be identified and involved in the entire evaluation process.
- There still seems to be some difficulty within PIs with using evaluations as a learning tool - both in planning and in using evaluation findings. Yet there is a tacit understanding and acceptance that recipient institutions need to keep doing evaluations. How these are used is unclear as sometimes evaluations are done at the end of projects or too close to the end of projects for any meaningful integration of lessons learned from the evaluation. Perhaps program officers need to be reminded regularly of the form, function and use of evaluations for and in PIs as well as for and in projects.
- PIs that have worked closely with the Evaluation Unit have benefited well. The possibility of calling on the EU for suggestions on evaluators and approaches according to different cases is reassuring.
- Evaluations are most useful when the objectives and users are specified. Use depends on whether an evaluation is oriented towards IDRC management vs. the project staff. Evaluations are less useful for PIs if they are management oriented, as program staff are less enthusiastic about evaluations for management, SMC, the Board.